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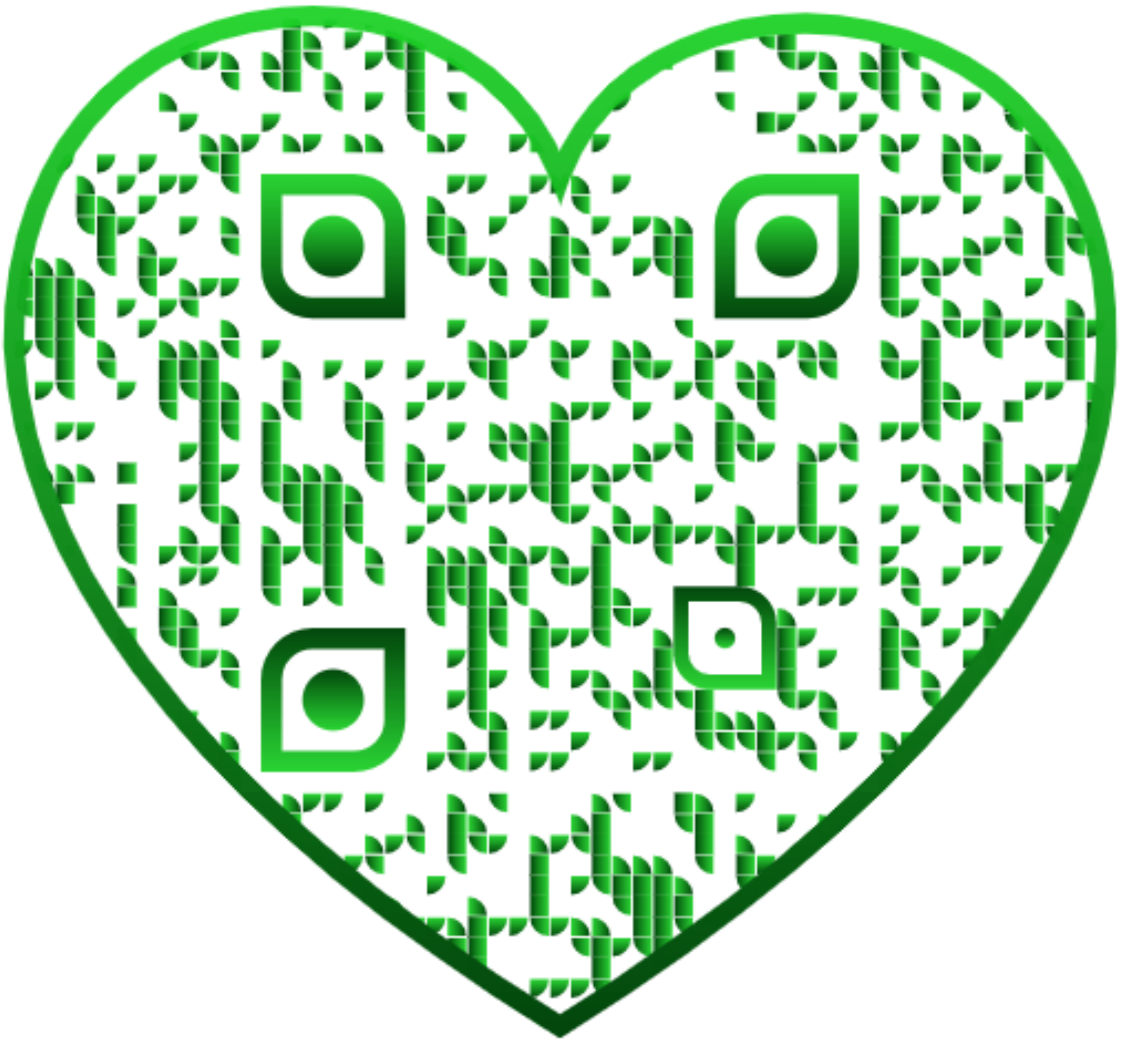
RA

The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God of the Sun

MARKUS CARABAS



Ra: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God of the Sun

By Markus Carabas and Charles River Editors

Jeff Dahl's depiction of Ra-Horakhty

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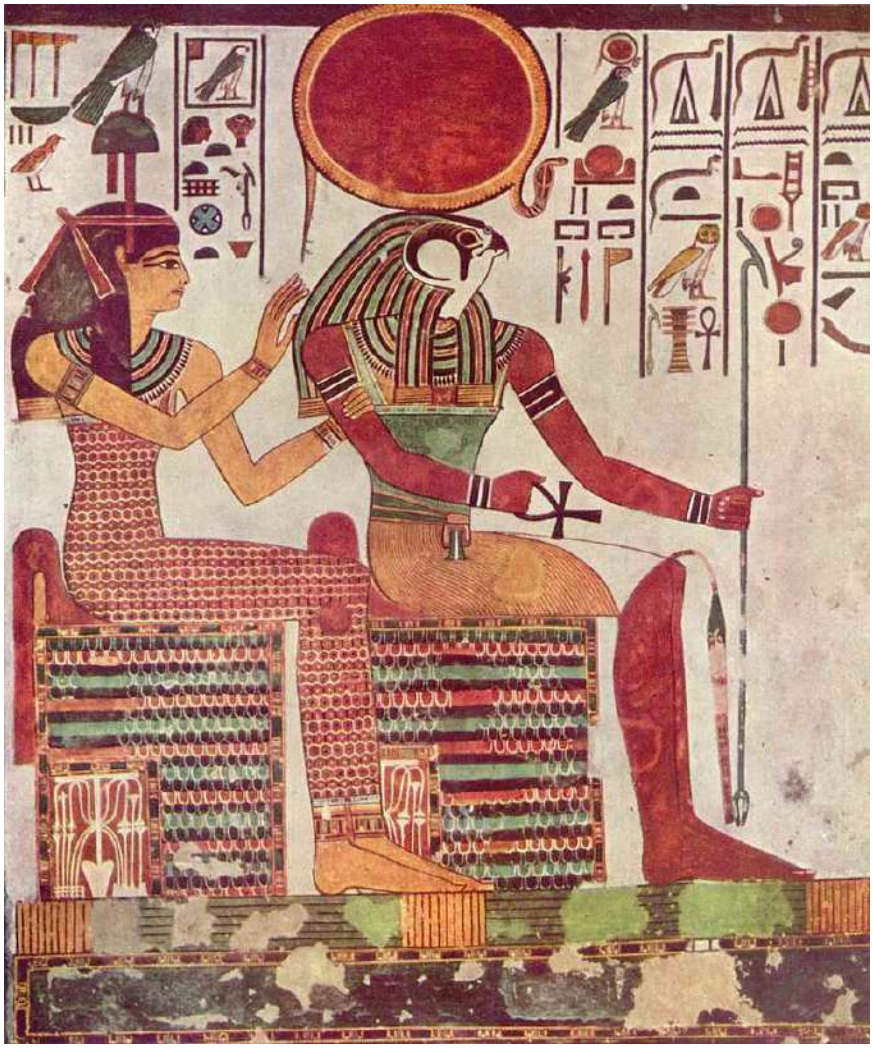
Introduction



A depiction of Imentet and Ra in Nefertari's tomb

Ra

"It is I who made the sky and set [it] in place in order to install the bau of the gods in it so that I am with them for the eternal recurrence [of time] produced through the years. My Ba is Magic. It is [even] greater than this."[1]

Africa may have given rise to the first human beings, and Egypt probably gave rise to the first great civilizations, which continue to fascinate modern societies across the globe nearly 5,000 years later. From the Library and

Lighthouse of Alexandria to the Great Pyramid at Giza, the Ancient Egyptians produced several wonders of the world, revolutionized architecture and construction, created some of the world's first systems of mathematics and medicine, and established language and art that spread across the known world. With world-famous leaders like King Tut and Cleopatra, it's no wonder that today's world has so many Egyptologists.

What makes the accomplishments of the Ancient Egyptians all the more remarkable is that Egypt was historically a place of great political turbulence. Its position made it both valuable and vulnerable to tribes across the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and Ancient Egypt had no shortage of its own internecine warfare. Its most famous conquerors would come from Europe, with Alexander the Great laying the groundwork for the Hellenic Ptolemy line and the Romans extinguishing that line after defeating Cleopatra and driving her to suicide.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of ancient Egyptian civilization was its inception from the ground up, as the ancient Egyptians had no prior civilization which they could use as a template. In fact, ancient Egypt itself became a template for the civilizations that followed. The Greeks and the Romans were so impressed with Egyptian culture that they often attributed many attributes of their own culture–usually erroneously–to the Egyptians. With that said, some minor elements of ancient Egyptian culture were, indeed, passed on to later civilizations. Egyptian statuary appears to have had an initial influence on the Greek version, and the ancient Egyptian language continued long after the pharaonic period in the form of the Coptic language.

Although the Egyptians may not have passed their civilization directly on to later peoples, the key elements that comprised Egyptian civilization, including their religion, early ideas of state, and art and architecture, can be found among other civilizations. For instance, civilizations far separated in time and space, such as China and Mesoamerica, possessed key elements that were similar to those found in ancient Egypt. Indeed, since Egyptian civilization represented some fundamental human concepts, a study of their culture can be useful when trying to understand many other pre-modern cultures.

To the ancient Egyptians, as was the case with any society made up of

inquiring humans, the world was a confusing and often terrifying place of destruction, death and unexplained phenomena. In order to make sense of such an existence, they resorted to teleological stories. Giving a phenomenon a story made it less horrifying, and it also helped them make sense of the world around them. Unsurprisingly, then, the ancient Egyptian gods permeated every aspect of existence.

Given the abundance of funerary artifacts that have been found within the sands of Egypt, it sometimes seems as though the Ancient Egyptians were more concerned with the matters of the afterlife than they were with matters of the life they experienced from day to day. This is underscored most prominently by the pyramids, which have captured the world's imagination for centuries.

Ra's name was all but ubiquitous in ancient Egyptian texts, to the point that many people today have come across it in history classes. Amun-Ra, Atum-Ra, and Ra-Harakhti have been used in modern cinema and literature for decades, yet isolating "Ra" as a single character, for all its preeminence in the concept of Egyptian mythology, is frustratingly difficult.

People familiar with Egyptian mythology know Ra as a sun god, which would seem to explain Ra's centrality in ancient Egyptian religion, but there is so much more to his being a solar entity than a simple manifestation of this awe-inspiring, daily phenomenon for early humans. Ra was a king and tyrant, a lover and friend. It is only through the understanding of this deity as such that people today can fully appreciate the richness of his character and the roles he played in ancient Egyptian religious thought.

Ra: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God of the Sun looks at the god that had such a decisive impact on the Egyptians' concepts of life. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about Ra like never before.

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Note

The absolute dating of individual pharaohs has been a matter of long debate among Egyptologists, mostly due to the existence of several king lists that vary in the number of years they assign to each ruler.

The basic outline comes from Manetho, one of two priestly advisors to Ptolemy I (305-282 BCE). Manetho's *History* divides the pharaohs into 30 native dynasties and gives the number of years each ruler was on the throne, but no complete copy of Manetho's work exists.

Other king lists are also fragmentary. The Palermo Stone from Dynasty V (2498-2345 BCE) is a fairly complete list starting from the last Predynastic kings, but it sadly ends in the middle of Dynasty V. The Royal List of Karnak goes all the way to Tuthmosis III (1504-1450 BCE) and is especially useful in that it records many of the minor rulers of the Second Intermediate Period, when Egypt was divided into two or more states. The Royal List of Abydos skips these kings but runs all the way to the reign of Seti I (1291-1278 BCE). The Royal Canon of Turin is a badly damaged papyrus dating to around 1200 BCE that gives the precise length of reign of each ruler, often down to the day. Many portions of the list are missing, however.

Discoveries of other texts and radiocarbon dating have helped refine the dates, but there are still competing theories regarding the chronology, and all have both merits and problems. For the sake of consistency, this work uses the chronology set forth by Egyptologist Peter A. Clayton in his various works. The reader should note that while Clayton's chronology is a popular one, it is by no means universally accepted.

The Origins of Ancient Egyptian Mythology

Ancient Egypt spans a history of some 3,000 years, depending on how people want to divide it up. Many cultures, such as ancient Greece, divided their lengthy histories either according to cultural changes, such as the "Classical Era" beginning with the onset of democracy and ending with the death of Alexander the Great, or by following the reigns of each subsequent ruler. In ancient Egypt, the vast history was originally divided into dynasties.

Living in the 3rd century BCE, the Egyptian priest Manetho divided history into 30 dynasties, which later Egyptologists have grouped into longer periods according to how much of what is considered Egypt today fell under the rule of each king. They are given as follows, according to Shaw's chronology:[2]

The Pharaonic Period

Early Dynastic Period (Dynasties 1-2) ca.3050-2660 BCE

Old Kingdom (Dynasties 3-6) ca. 2660-2190 BCE

First Intermediate Period (Dynasties 7-11) ca. 2190-2066 BCE

Middle Kingdom (Dynasties 11-12) ca. 2066-1780 BCE

Second Intermediate Period (Dynasties 13-17) ca. 1780-1549 BCE

New Kingdom (Dynasties 18-20) ca. 1549-1069 BCE

Third Intermediate Period (21-25) ca. 1069-664 BCE

Late Period (Dynasties 26-31) ca. 664-332 BCE

The Ptolemaic Period 332-30 BCE

The Roman Period 30 BCE – 395 CE

In order to understand why modern scholars chose to divide history into longer periods of dynastic rule, it is necessary to understand the geography of Egypt's ruled dominions. The river that defined and dictated much of ancient people's lives and ideologies, the Nile, runs from south to north, with a sprawling delta in the north and more barren land to the south. This distinction is the reason for one of the most confusing aspects of Egyptian history, as the "Upper Kingdom" was in the south and the "Lower Kingdom" was in the north.[3] These "Two Lands" were represented by two distinct crowns – the "Red Crown" for the Lower Kingdom and the "White Crown" for the "Upper Kingdom" – each worn by their distinct rulers and worn as a "Double Crown" when both kingdoms were unified. It was during the "intermediate" periods that the country was divided into the two kingdoms, and these periods were often marked by political turmoil and a distinct drop in cultural production, such as art and architecture.

From as early as the Early Dynastic Period, the country was divided into smaller dominions along the river that modern scholars call “Nomes.” The word “nome” comes from the ancient Greeks who, during the rule of the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty (332-30 BCE) in Egypt, referred to each as a kind of “pasturage” coming under the overarching rule of the Pharaoh of that kingdom. This made for a useful way of organising the inhabitants of the two kingdoms, but it causes problems when trying to define what version of a common myth is the “correct” or “most widely believed.” The reason for this is that the myths, though they had some similarities, could diverge widely from nome to nome. That is why writers such as the ancient historian Plutarch chose to single out a particular version of a myth and record or study it alone.

Later scholars further subdivided these various types of myth according to the cult center that either produced or “standardized” them.[4] They refer to them as “theologies,” such as the “Memphite Theology” (myths from Memphis) or the “Heliopolitan Theology” (myths from Heliopolis). There is the theory that these “theologies” were competing in some way with others from different cult centers. Shaw, however, takes the view that they were more alternatives than opposing theories and although each cult center would substitute a god from another nome for one of their own local deities, there wasn’t really any kind of animosity between the differing believers. Despite the fact that there was no externally enforced dogma over the whole of Egypt, the Egyptians still managed to maintain some overarching concepts. One such concept is that of the creation of the universe. Generally speaking, there was a limitless dark ocean of “chaos” called Nun, out of which a god was born who instigated creation.[5] The different cult centers felt at liberty to amend or augment that concept to incorporate local tastes and allegiances to deities. Later on, during the period of the New Kingdom, the cult center of Thebes gained prominence and the priests there tried to unify the earlier traditions of Egypt. In this attempt, Amun was the creator god but the Thebans also incorporated the traditions of the major cult centers like Hermopolis, Memphis and Heliopolis, which often seem quite disparate accounts to the modern reader but were quite ingeniously brought together at Thebes around 1200 BCE.[6]

The general creation story contains within it two aspects that are crucial to

understanding all of the myths of ancient Egypt: *maat* and *isfet*. Isfet represents chaos or disorder, generally speaking, and it was seen as a fundamental element of everything in existence. There was no notion of trying to eradicate isfet from their general lives in ancient Egypt; after all, it was said to be one of the elements that was present in the limitless ocean at the dawn of creation. The only desire for ancient Egyptians was that isfet never became more prevalent than maat, its opposite: justice. Maat was often depicted as a goddess wearing a feather on her head, which was also the hieroglyph that represented her.[7] She, or simply the concept of justice, was believed to be present in all aspects of life and if it was broken by anyone, there would be a punishment. According to the Middle Kingdom "Coffin Text" it was believed that Atum, the "Great Finisher" of creation,[8] inhaled maat in order to gain his consciousness: "Inhale your daughter Maat [said Nun to Atum] and raise her to your nostril so that your consciousness may live. May they not be far from you, your daughter Maat and your son Shu, whose name is "life" … it is your son Shu who will lift you up."[9]

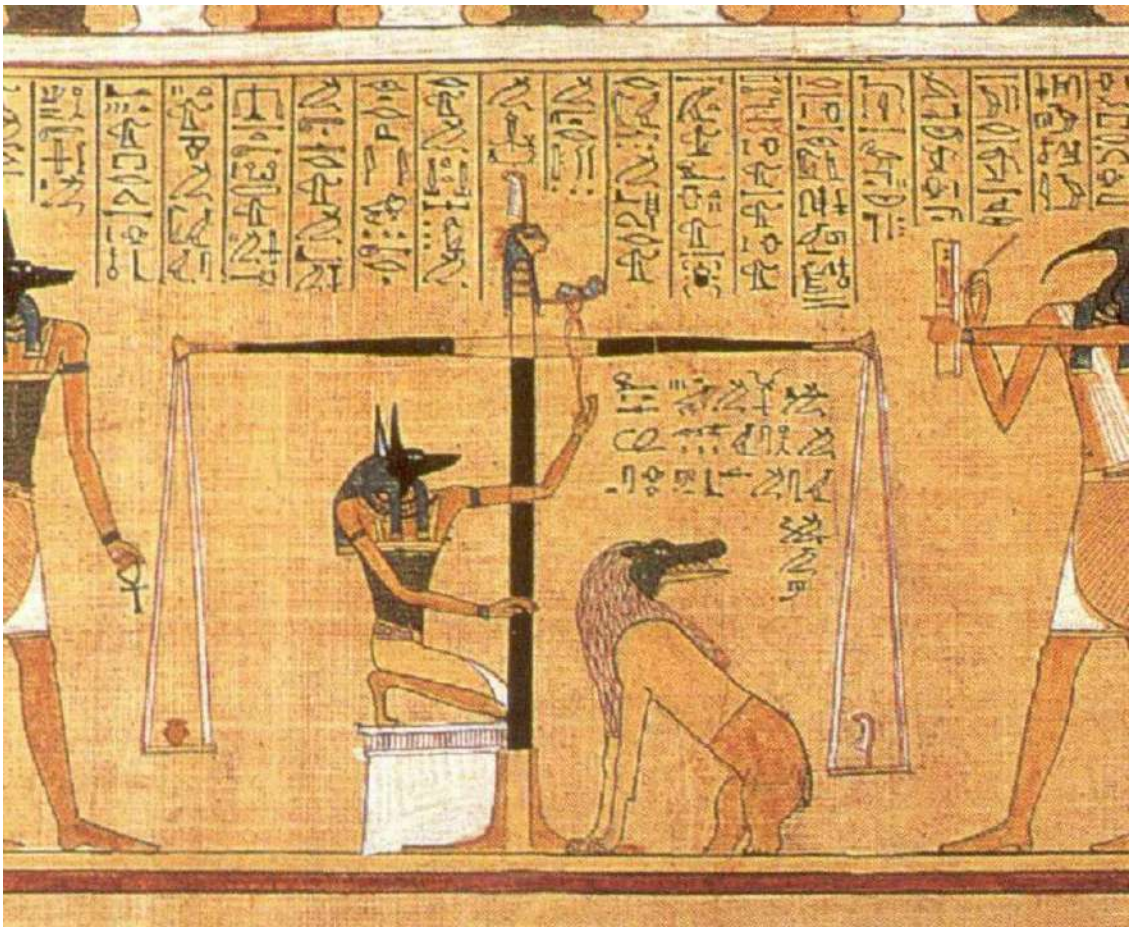
After that, Atum was capable of making the waters of Nun recede away from him, making him rise above them and become "what remained" or the "mound of creation." It's important to take note of the fact that there was no creation until Atum inhaled life and justice. Therefore without maat and her dualistic counterpart, there would have been no world, and that is the reason for maat and isfet's ubiquity, as well as the acceptance of chaos in the world as seen by the ancient Egyptians. After Atum had separated himself from Nun, the children he kept inside, notably Shu and maat/isfet, often represented as a form of the goddess Tefnut, were now separated from their father, and Tefnut would go on to become the mother of all the gods.

The Recording of The Myths

Since each of the nomes had their own version of a given myth, collecting Egyptian myths into a definitive text was never possible. This has further exacerbated the mythologist's job, since these stories have survived in disparate versions and media.

The myths may have arrived at the hands of scholars from inscriptions on pyramid walls (such as the Old Kingdom's "Pyramid Texts"), painted on the inside of coffins (such as the Middle Kingdom's "Coffin Texts"), or texts

written on papyri (such as the famous “Book of the Dead,” which dates back to the Second Intermediate Period).[10] The mythologist’s job is made even more exacting by the fact that, since the scribes who documented the myths assumed their readers were knowledgeable about the stories’ details, they opted to refer to myths obliquely out of a sense of decorum. This was often the case for Osiris, whose death was a troublesome topic for those inscribing on the funerary monuments since it was thought that simply mentioning his death could “magically harm the deceased.”[11]



Scenes from the Book of the Dead

The vast history of Egypt makes tracking the development of certain myths a complex process. In terms of the oldest description of death, modern scholars have the Pyramid Texts. These were initially inscribed on the walls of the 5th Dynasty pyramid of Unas at Saqqara,[12] and they documented and gave advice to the king on his journey into the afterlife. These inscriptions were later copied onto other pyramids from the Old Kingdom and have therefore survived in good condition.

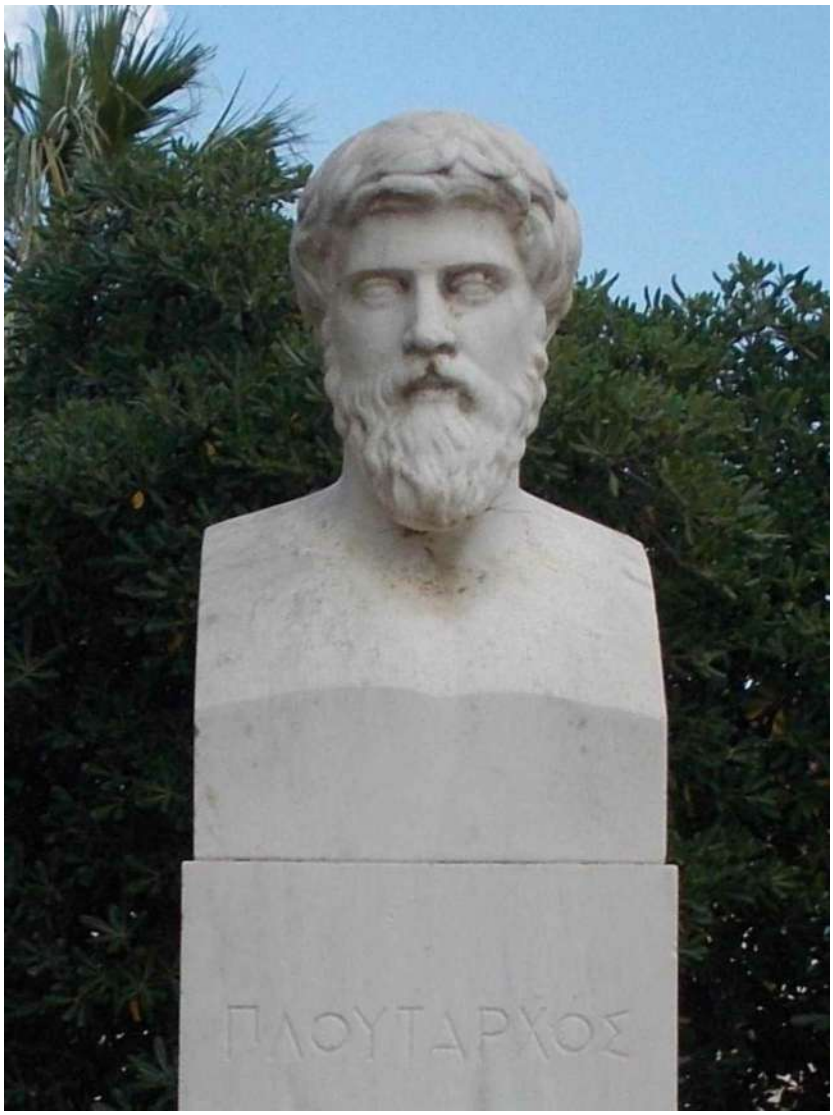
Unas Pyramid Text

Possibly the next most influential source came from the Roman era. Plutarch was a Greek historian and priest who lived in the late 1st and early 2nd century CE. He traveled to Egypt, it seems, but once he arrived there he was incapable of reading any hieroglyphs, so he largely depended on conversations with the locals and also a smattering of earlier literature that speculated on the identity of Egyptian gods and compared them with the Greeks' own pantheon. For instance, to the ancient Greeks the god Amun was Zeus, and the same applied to Hermes and Thoth, Apollo and Horus, and

Dionysus and Osiris. The connection between Greece and Egypt was an ancient one and continues to have an influence on modern readers since many of the cult centers of ancient Egypt are referred to by their ancient Greek names, such as Hermopolis the City of Hermes, rather than their ancient Egyptian names, most likely because of the troublesome nature of transliterating Egyptian words. Nevertheless, Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris* is the fullest account of the key myth in Egyptian mythology and is the best-known version for modern scholarship too.[13]

Despite the fact that Plutarch's account is late in terms of the wider history of Egyptian mythology, it is a surprisingly accurate take on the formation of the myth of Isis and Osiris, dating back to around 600 years before his arrival.[14] Of course, this does not make it an accurate account of the much earlier story of Osiris, but since describing his death and dismemberment was not a taboo for a Greek, his later account did not suffer from the obliqueness of the early sources.

Moreover, although Plutarch was not an Egyptian, he was an excellent scholar of foreign mythology. For him, the reason for writing down the myth of Isis and Osiris was to try and find a "fundamental truth" to the myths of both his own culture (of which he was a priest at Delphi for the remaining 30 years of his life) and that of his neighboring culture, which all Greeks considered to be much more ancient than their own. It was his scholarly approach and earnest desire to record the "truth" that makes his already interesting story worthy of study as a genuine account of the myth of Isis and Osiris.



A bust of Plutarch

The Gods as Concepts

Like in many polytheistic religious beliefs, the gods of ancient Egypt were neither omnipotent nor omnipresent, despite appearing in many locations simultaneously in some of the myths.[15] In fact, the ancient Egyptians used to worship the deity of the location they found themselves in, since each deity was more or less “present” in each part of the country. They were decidedly human in their relationships with each other. Just like the ancient Greek gods, they fought and argued, made love and married, and were ultimately capable of death, even if this meant that they would simply be reborn later on. Each god and goddess was “responsible” for an aspect of reality the ancient

Egyptians encountered every day but, when they needed to, they could share their powers with another deity, which resulted in a kind of *merging* of the two. This was the case for the "dying sun god" who merged with Osiris so as to borrow his regenerative power and be "reborn" the following day.[16]

In the Memphite theology, the universe is created by the god Ptah, who "conceived the elements of creation in his heart and pronounced them into existence with the divine words as he pronounced their names." Yet some scholars believe that Ptah was only capable of such creation after he borrowed the heart and tongue from Amun, the ultimate creator; as such it was Ptah's being the personification of "creative process" that directed and guided Amun's creative abilities.[17]

When the deities merged or even appeared to take on the attributes of another god or goddess they were said to "literally become" the other deity. Shaw gives the example of Hathor attacking mankind with such a rage that she actually transformed into the bloodthirsty goddess Sekhmet. It might be best to think of the deities of ancient Egypt as manifestations rather than distinct personalities with concrete biographies. As such they helped the ancient Egyptians describe the world around them and, by giving precedents in their myths, explain away the more confusing aspects of why the world is the way it is.[18]

In ancient Egyptian culture the duality of deities – most often manifested in their male/female relationships – was an integral aspect of the belief system. This duality appeared in Nun, the limitless ocean of potentiality out of which the universe was born. Within those waters, the male and female aspects appeared as frogs (males) and snakes (females). There were four couples, according to the beliefs at Hermopolis, making up the eight most important gods of "pre-creation" referred to at this cult center as the "Ogdoad." Each of these gods and goddesses acquired names and, as a unit, they represented the earliest aspects of reality. Nun and Naunet represented the "limitless waters" out of which everything was created; Huh and Hauhet represented the concept of "infinity"; Kuk and Kauket represented "darkness," and Amun and Amunet represented the concept of "hiddenness."[19] Later assessments of the Ogdoad, certainly by the time of the Theban attempt at "unification," emphasize the role of Amun in the creation of the first island and

subsequently of the egg from which the sun god is hatched.

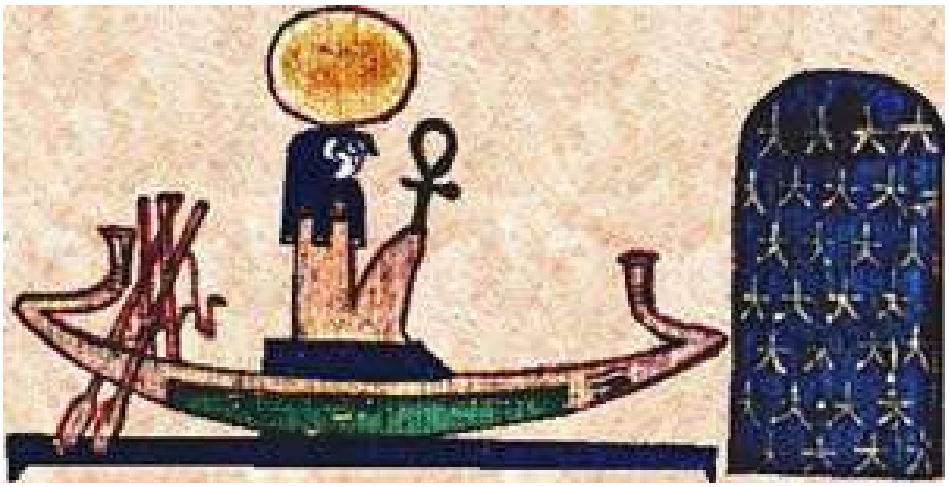
Atum's children, Shu and Tefnut, were also both siblings and a couple at the same time but their separation from their father led to the separation between an "above" and "below" by Shu, which created all of the space in which life could appear and grow. Also, Shu represented *neheh*, which was the Egyptian concept of cyclical time, whereas his wife came to represent *djet*, which was the concept of "time at a standstill, covering everything that is remaining and lasting, such as mummies or stone architecture," according to Gary Shaw.[20]

After Shu and Tefnut were separated from their father, they gave birth to a pair of deities called Nut and Geb. Nut was the sky goddess, often depicted as a naked lady with her hands and feet touching the earth and her body representing the heavens. Geb was the male earth god, usually represented as a reclining man with green skin with foliage on it. There is a story told in Plutarch's *Moralia* that equates the Egyptian gods with those of the ancient Greeks, and the story talks about how Nut and Geb (whom Plutarch equates with Greek deities Rhea and Cronus) can't make love because Shu kept them separated. When they tried to meet in secret, they incurred the wrath of the sun, or "Re." "They say that the Sun, when he became aware of Rhea's intercourse with Cronus, invoked a curse upon her that she should not give birth to a child in any month or year; but Hermes [Thoth], being enamoured of the [Moon], consorted with her. Later, playing at draughts with the moon, he won from her the seventieth part of each of her periods of illumination, and from all the winnings he composed five days, and intercalated them as an addition to the ['original'] three hundred and sixty days. The Egyptians even now call these five days intercalated and celebrate them as the birthdays of the gods. They relate that on the first of these days Osiris was born, and at the hour of his birth a voice issued forth saying, 'The Lord of All advances to the light.' However, some relate that a certain Pamyles, while he was drawing water in Thebes, heard a voice issuing from the shrine of Zeus, which bade him proclaim with a loud voice that a mighty and beneficent king, Osiris, had been born; and for this Cronus entrusted to him the child Osiris, which he brought up. It is in his honour that the festival of Pamylia is celebrated, a festival which resembles the phallic processions. On the second of these days Arueris was born whom they call

Apollo, and some call him also the elder Horus. On the third day Typhon [Seth] was born, but not in due season or manner, but with a blow he broke through his mother's side and leapt [sic] forth. On the fourth day Isis was born in the regions that are ever moist; and on the fifth Nephthys, to whom they give the name of Finality and the name of Aphrodite, and some also the name of Victory. There is also a tradition that Osiris and Arueris were sprung from the Sun, Isis from Hermes, and [Seth] and Nephthys from Cronus. For this reason the kings considered the third of the intercalated days as inauspicious, and transacted no business on that day, nor did they give any attention to their bodies until nightfall. They relate, moreover, that Nephthys became the wife of [Seth]; but Isis and Osiris were enamoured of each other and consorted together in the darkness of the womb before their birth. Some say that Arueris came from this union and was called the elder Horus by the Egyptians, but Apollo by the Greeks."[21]

Since many non-Greek sources do not include the birth of Horus the Elder in their lists counting all of Amun's children (Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Seth, Isis, and Nephthys) the remaining nine make up what is known as the *Great Ennead*, deities who "represented the physical creation of the world."[22] That Amun was the Ennead's progenitor does not go far enough toward defining the power he maintained after their birth. It's important to remember that Amun created Atum, and then they became one deity that subsequently birthed all of existence, including the Ennead. For this reason, the ancient Egyptians saw Amun in all things, especially the gods and goddesses of the Ennead, who were understood to be forces called *Netjeru* (the "gods") that interacted independently but were always a part of Amun, the creator.

The Solar Barque



An Egyptian depiction of Ra on the solar barque

The story of the “Solar Barque” or the boat of Re, is one of the principal features of Egyptian mythology since it not only embodies the prominence Re held in the religious mindset but it also serves as a good example of the ancient Egyptian concept of cyclical time.

Ancient Egyptians believed that Re traversed the sky each day in a glorious barque equipped with a highly trained crew of deities that guaranteed its safe passage. Once the zenith had been reached, the barque would slip down the sky towards the West, where lay the dreaded entrance to the land of the dead, the Duat. At the horizon, Re and his crew would change into the “night boat” called the Mesketet. Although it still belonged to Re, and therefore was still the ‘sun boat,” the Mesketet was named as such because it was associated with “perishing” as Re was said to enter the land of the dead and die there (temporarily).[23] To the ancient Egyptians, the Duat was no blissful land of rest. It was a sprawling terrain that spanned the underworld from the West to the East and it was replete with dangers that threatened the re-emergence (and effective “re-birth”) of Re and the sun that was the source of all life in the land of the living.

This kind of story is indicative of acclaimed mythologist G. S. Kirk’s second definition of myth as an “operative, iterative or validatory” story, the type of which “[tended] to be repeated regularly on ritual or ceremonial occasions … to bring about a desirable continuity in nature or society.”[24] It was the role of the priests to repeat this story each day, most probably with supporting rituals to aid its efficacy, so as to ensure the continuation of the

cosmos. Naturally, this is not unique to Egyptian mythology but the role of Seth in its proceedings is particularly interesting.

The god of disorder and chaos boarded the Solar Barque each day and took a place of prominence on it at the bow. Alongside a cadre of other deities, including the sister he tormented and the nephew who would be his greatest adversary among the gods, Seth took up his scepter and an iron lance and embarked on the perilous journey. The surviving sources tell of a journey of 12 hours that involved the cadre of deities having to vanquish the enemies of Re and his boat with the help of a variety of divine aids, from fire-spitting cobras to the ancient god Aker "whose two sphinx-like heads face away from each other at either end of his flat body."[25] It is at the 7th hour, however, that the barque encounters its most formidable enemy, the great serpent Apophis.

Seth's connection with Apophis is an integral one to Egyptian mythology and shows Seth to be more virtuous than he was later depicted. Seth was the strongest of the gods, and, as such, he had a prestigious place on the great "Solar Barque" that traversed the skies each day and contended with the perilous land of the dead, the Duat, at night. To the ancient Egyptians the rising of the sun was not a guaranteed phenomenon each day, and many of the spells and rituals recorded in the surviving literature attests to the fragility of the cosmos and the priests' role in maintaining it.[26] The Duat, although ruled by the benevolent Osiris, was seen as a land of dangerous monsters and demons and so the Solar Barque needed Seth at its prow to protect it.

The progression of the solar barque through the Duat happened in stages, each one representing one of the hours of the night. Each hour was like an episode in the divine adventure, and each episode had its gatekeeper and its perils. The celebrated Egyptologist, Joyce Tyldesley, beautifully outlines the stages of Ra's journey, including female names given by New Kingdom text, the *Amduat*, for the regions of the Duat:

Hour One: *Smiter of the Heads of the Enemies of Ra*, where the aged Atum is welcomed into the underworld by the singing baboons of the horizon and the goddess, *Maat*.

Hour Two: *The Wise Protector of Her Lord*, where the solar barque joins four other boats, and Ra distributes the fields of the Duat among his crew so

that they may nourish themselves before the trials ahead.

Hour Three: *She Who Slices Souls,* in which Ra moors his boat and revives the dead god Osiris.

Hour Four: *Great in Her Powers,* in which the solar barque takes a dangerous diagonal passage, guarded by venomous snakes with wings, legs, and the heads of men. The boat itself transforms into a fire-breathing snake, and its breath lights up the dark, cavernous way.

Hour Five: *She Who is in Her Boat.* The journey is difficult now, and the boat has to be towed by seven men and women, and it is greeted by the solar beetle, Khepri, who descends to help the boat on its way.

Hour Six: *Proficient Leader*, midnight. Respite at the half-way point of the journey, in which the solar barque rests in the land of the Blessed Dead and Ra and his corpse in the form of a scarab beetle.

Hour Seven: *She Who Repels the Forces of Chaos and Decapitates the Savage-aced* is a wonderfully named region of the underworld in which the solar barque encounters Apophis for the first time. Depending on the source, Apophis is either depicted as a great crocodile or more commonly, as an enormous serpent. He was said to have been born from Neith's saliva while she was still in the eternal waters of Nun. A monster of discord, he began his life trying, unsuccessfully, to swallow the eternal waters and stop the universe from coming into being at the onset. Here, Seth, Isis, and Serket vanquish him, cut him into pieces, and the enemies of Osiris are bound and decapitated by a cat-headed being. Few modern Hollywood movies match this region of the Duat for violence and vengeance.

Hour Eight: *The Coffer of Her Deities,* where staffs with human heads trundle along beside the barque, vanquishing the enemies of Ra with knives. Here, Ra meets the cavern-dwellers who are "Egypt's most secret and ancient gods"[27] and they greet him with cheers while sitting on the hieroglyph for "cloth", a probable reference to the mummification process, in which the journey of Ra is an analogy for the journey the mummified person would take once he was interred.

Hour Nine: *The Wise Protector of Her Lord.* It is unclear as to why this

region of the Duat has the same name as that in Hour Two, but Ra nevertheless meets with Osiris' protective spirits, twelve fire-spitting cobras that feed off the blood of his enemies.

Hour Ten: *The Raging One, Who Boils the Rebel Alive.* Just as its name inspires fear, so, too, would the region. This is a land of judgment in which the ferocious lion-headed goddess, Sekhmet, judges the dead. She gives those she finds unworthy to Horus so that he may destroy them. On a happier note: here, the bodies of those who have drowned float peacefully in the waters of the Duat, and the gods grant them everlasting peace despite the fact they were never able to have a proper burial.

Hour Eleven: *The Instructor, Lady of the Sacred Boat, at Whose Emergence the Rebels are Punished,* in which more unworthy dead are punished, and Isis and Nephthys prepare for the sunrise by carrying the crowns of the two kingdoms to the goddess, Neith.

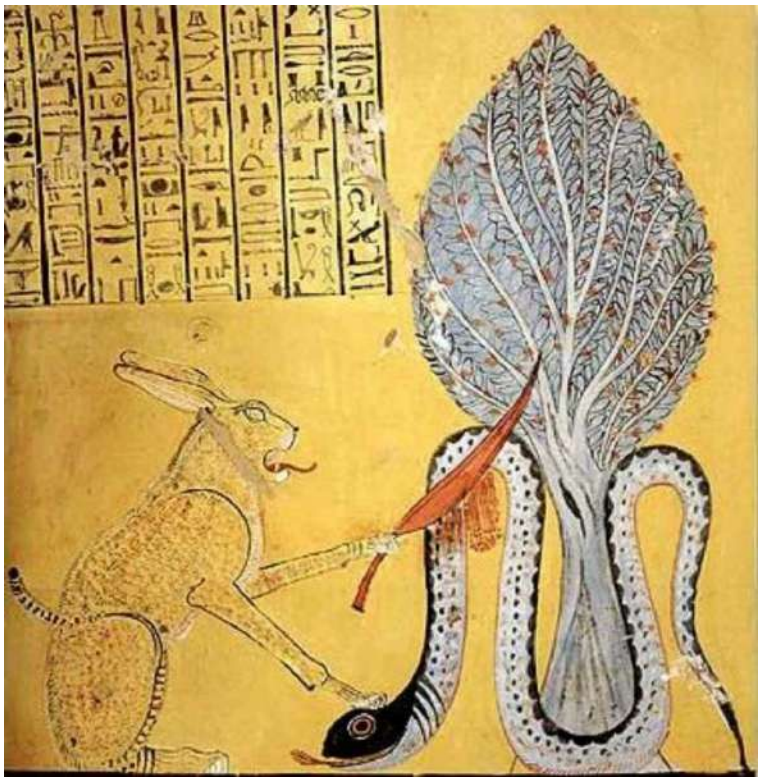
Hour Twelve: *Who Sees the Beauty of Ra,* in which twelve men and thirteen women pull the solar barque through the body of the snake, Mehen, whose name means "life of the gods". Ra emerges as *Khepri* and Shu closes the entrance to the Duat behind them.[28]

The journey through the land of the Duat is essentially the story of death and rebirth. Since it was believed Ra was "born" to his mother, the sky goddess, each day and figuratively "died" each night, the texts recording the process hope the same will happen to the deceased.[29] It does the modern reader well to imagine the fears the ancient Egyptians had of death, as well as their hope to be reborn and welcomed by their gods and goddesses in a land beyond the world they knew. It is a very early example of a concept which continues to be held by many of the world's religions today.

Apophis is, essentially, the manifestation of chaos. He embodied the Egyptian concept of isfet in every action and appearance in the mythology. By trying to impede the Solar Barque on its natural journey, Apophis' role was that of interrupting the natural state of the universe, maat. The duality here is unmistakable but the earlier myths allow for a level of cognitive dissonance too. For instance, to the ancient Egyptians the snake was a symbol of protection and of rebirth and renewal but, in the case of Apophis, the

symbol was flipped on its head in order to provide the gods with their ultimate adversary. This dissonance was not unique in this myth, however, as the role of Seth, Horus' and Osiris' great adversary, was also inverted since he was the champion of Re and the 'slayer of the enemy of Pre daily." It would seem that the ancient Egyptians were quite comfortable with this level of dissonance, or at least irregularity, in their myths but as time went on the lines became less blurred and Seth's and Apophis' roles came into starker contrast with the world of maat.

An Egyptian depiction of Seth spearing the serpent Apophis



A depiction of Ra, in the form of a cat, spearing Apophis

Vocabulary concerning Apophis had obvious repercussions outside of Egypt. Named the “Rebel” or the “Great Adversary” or even the “Evil One,” Apophis’ influence on later Christian ideas of their own “Adversary” is unmistakable. However, the ancient Greeks were no less influenced by this great snake, although the characters of Apophis and Seth became more intertwined. In Greco-Roman period Seth came to be associated with the very chaos beast he was known to the Egyptians as defeating.[30] When Plutarch was writing, he often used the name of Typhon to describe Seth, but Typhon/Python was the most fearsome serpentine monster of Greek mythology, not he that defeated it. Therein lies the confusion behind the nomenclature, since it was the Greek god Apollo who was associated with fighting Typhon, as related in the Homeric Hymn to that god:

> “And thereafter [Hera] never came to the bed of wise Zeus for a full year … But when the months and days were fulfilled and the seasons duly came on as the earth moved round, she bore one neither like the gods nor mortal men, fell, cruel Typhaon, to be a plague to men. Straightway large-eyed queenly Hera took him and

> bringing one evil thing to another such, gave him to the dragoness; and she received him. And this Typhon used to work great mischief among the famous tribes of men. Whosoever met the dragoness, the day of doom would sweep him away, until the lord Apollo, who deals death from afar, shot a strong arrow at her. Then she, rent with bitter pangs, lay drawing great gasps for breath and rolling about that place. An awful noise swelled up unspeakable as she writhed continually this way and that amid the wood: and so she left her life, breathing it forth in blood. Then Phoebus Apollo boasted over her: 'Now rot here upon the soil that feeds man. You at least shall live no more to be a fell bane to men who eat the fruit of the all-nourishing earth, and who will bring hither perfect hecatombs. Against cruel death neither Typhoeus shall avail you nor ill-famed Chimera, but here shall the Earth and shining Hyperion make you rot.'
>
> "Thus said Phoebus, exulting over her: and darkness covered her eyes. And the holy strength of Helios made her rot away there; wherefore the place is now called Pytho, and men call the lord Apollo by another name, Pythian; because on that spot the power of piercing Helios made the monster rot away."[31]

When the ancient Greeks came into contact with the ancient Egyptians and learned of their mythology, they instantly saw the figure of Apollo in Horus, whose victory over his father's killer Seth (equated to Typhon/Python) was celebrated every year by driving wild asses over a precipice.[32] In the case of the Homeric Hymn, Typhon is defeated by Helios, the Greek god of the sun, and the "all-nourishing earth" that was integral to the Egyptian notion of maat was rid of its "bane" forever more. This story is of distinctly Greek design, rather than Egyptian. The merging of Seth and Apophis to produce the character of Typhon, as well as the lack of a cyclical battle between good and evil, are just two examples of why this is so. And yet there is another, euhemeristic theory that some scholars have pointed out to make sense of the Egyptian version too.

Interestingly, the Hyksos kings mentioned above who invaded and occupied the Nile Delta around the 17th century BCE included among

themselves one king who went by the name of Apophis. As legend has it, King Apophis provoked the king at Thebes to fight a war that would ultimately result in the Hyksos people being driven out of Egypt by those from Thebes. It's not much of a legend, but what can be seen in this story is the mythologizing of a real-world conflict. The Hyksos people being driven out by kings of Thebes does not inspire much poetic or religious thinking, but it does when the conflict is represented as a battle between the forces of two distinct gods. Since the "foreigners" of the Nile Delta worshipped Seth (or, in this case the Canaanite occupiers worshipped his equivalent, Baal) and the forces of Thebes were known for their worship of Horus, the real-world battle became a symbolic battle between the two gods from their land.[33]

Curiously, there are some scholars who see an influence from the ancient Egyptian depictions of Seth and Apophis in a much later Christian myth. Due to the occasional depiction of Apophis as a crocodile-serpent hybrid, it has been suggested that Apophis was one of the precursors of the western dragon and Seth, wielding his iron lance and defeating the beast under foot, has been connected with that ubiquitous saint George of dragon-slaying fame. This would not be the only – nor the most far-fetched – influence Egyptian art and thought had on later Christianity, but it certainly is an emotive one that continues to be felt and utilised today.

Egyptian religion was beautifully crafted to allow for the occurrence of tragedy. The permanent and irrefutable presence of *ismet* alongside *maat* in the cosmos ensured this, and the pantheons were so beautifully crafted that there was almost always a spell, song, rite or defending deity to ensure that the mechanics of the universe continued to function. For the Solar Barque, the obvious protective figure is Seth since he was the quintessential warrior against the serpent of chaos, Apophis. However, it was said that Thoth and the personified version of *maat* stood either side of the barque too and this is no unimportant feature of the solar barque myth.

Aside from the analogy of death and rebirth, the solar barque also represents the reign and dynasty of the king. Ra was, after all, the originator of the kingship. This does not necessarily mean he was the first in the defined line of kings. As will be discussed later on, Egyptian bureaucracy was far too convoluted for its mythology to be so straightforward. The attacks on the

barque by enemies of Ra and Osiris were, however, attacks on the king at his weakest, and the cadre of gods protecting Ra represented the king's entourage, who was expected to protect him in the same way.

There is an interesting story about Thoth's time on the solar barque. It recounts the moment when Isis, mother of the great god Horus, is protecting her son from his wicked uncle, Seth's, plans to murder the only other heir to the throne. The episode leading up to this is the quintessential struggle between pretenders. When it was Ra's son, Osiris', turn to take up the throne, he was murdered by his brother, Seth, who subsequently cut up the dead king's body and threw the pieces across Egypt. Osiris' wife, Isis, picked up the body and put it back together with magic. She even managed to conceive the child, Horus, with the corpse. As is the case in a Shakespearean drama, the wicked uncle plotted to do away with the threat to his kingship, as he had done with the previous king. Even though it was not written in stone that the throne should pass from father to son, it is generally accepted this was a just succession, made known to Isis by the wise god, Thoth.

While hiding in the marshes of Khemmis, Isis returned from scavenging for food only to find that her darling child had been bitten by a poisonous animal and was lying almost lifeless on the riverbank. Isis let out a lamenting cry that reached the solar barque, eventually causing it to stop mid-journey through the sky, and Thoth traveled down from the sky to determine the problem. When he arrived, he was berated by Isis for making plans to help Horus rise and ascend the throne without taking action. This time, Thoth had done more than simply plan - he came equipped with the "Breath of Life" with which to restore the young god. Thoth recited spells and performed sacred rituals binding Horus' protection with many natural features and animals in the world,[34] and then he returned to the solar barque and the sun-disk continued on its journey.

To explain his treatment of Horus, Thoth said that he understood the young god's importance to Isis, himself, and the rest of the gods. Obviously, this is a small, etiological myth within the greater story of Osiris' establishment of the royal line of Egyptian kings. Horus would grow up to battle his uncle for the inheritance of the throne, and in doing so, would bind the royal line to an order of succession from father to son, rather than brother to brother. Ra

would eventually be against Thoth's actions in favouring the son over the brother, but for the time being, the episode served two purposes: first, that Isis was powerful enough to make the solar barque stop mid-journey through the sky with her magic; and second, that only the matter of the potential kingship would warrant doing so.

Ra the King

An ancient statuette of Ra-Horakhty

Ra was said to have been the first word from his mother's mouth, and as such, he became the first land to emerge from the waters of Nun. The

primordial terra firma appeared as a mound of earth against whose shores the waters lapped the first waves. Today, scholars today believe the shape of this "mound" was probably the basis for the pyramids' form, and therefore, the pyramids are symbols harkening back to Ra's beginnings.[35]

His other symbols are varied. In human form, he wore the double crown of both kingdoms, but he was also depicted as a mongoose, a scarab beetle, a lizard, a snake, a bow-and-arrow-wielding baboon, a benu-bird, or simply "a sun disc, encircled by a protective cobra, sometimes with outstretched, feathered wings emerging from either side of the disc."[36]

A depiction of Ra as a scarab beetle

Whatever the mythological significance of his symbolism, it is generally agreed the ancient Egyptians believed Ra to be the first divine king of the world, and that during his reign, humans and gods walked the land together. His "capital" was Heliopolis, "The City of the Sun". Lying beneath the bustling metropolis of modern-day Cairo, it was the center of Ra's worship across the centuries.[37]

As the first of the divine kings, he became a symbol unto himself. His was the eternal power, mysticism, and exclusivity of the throne to which later kings would pay homage in the symbols of kingship decorating the walls of tombs and temples for millennia thereafter. His son was Osiris, and his grandson was Horus

According to surviving Egyptian texts, much later in the history, both imagined and real, Ra merged with Horus to become Ra-Harakhti, or *Ra-Horus of the Double Horizon,* who “triumphed over his enemies as he rose in the east.” This came about because the sun was seen as triumphing over the dangers - such as ferocious beasts, powerful demons, and the possibility of losing one's way in the labyrinthine realm that prevents them from returning to life - in the land of the dead. Both Ra and Horus came to embody the notion of struggling through trials and vanquishing their enemies (often enemies of supernatural and perilous strength) and Ra-Harakhti encapsulated and multiplied the strength and success of the two gods. This connection also gave way to Horus’s connection with his father, Osiris, Lord of the Underworld.[38] In this incarnation, Horus was represented as a falcon crowned with a sun disk, or even as the winged sun disk itself, like Ra, who traversed the sky and protected the sun. The sun, along with the Nile, was the source of Egypt’s wealth.

Ra’s foundation of the divine kingship was not, however, infallible and unchanging, as many foundations tend to be in myth. The order of inheritance would not be established until much later, and before then, the divine king would be troubled by the ambitions of both deities and humans.

The True Name of Ra

The reams of pages making up the literature of fantasy are riddled with accounts of powerful names, and the knowledge of those names are the domain of powerful sorcerers and sages. It is rather likely this fictional trope was inherited from the annals of ancient Egyptian mythology.

Names were an important part of Egyptian life. Children were named by their mothers at birth in case they died suddenly, and criminals were often stripped of their names as a punishment, thus making it appear as if they had never existed at all.[39]

According to the ancients, the gods tended not to use their true names, and they wouldn't allow their names to be known by anyone other than themselves if they could help it. There is power in a name, after all, and Ra worried endlessly about the power someone with the knowledge of his name might have over him. Ra kept his name hidden deep in the recesses of his

belly, and he used any number of pseudonyms and symbols to refer to himself instead.

Isis was, however, a cunning goddess. As the divine mother, she had high ambitions for her son, Horus, hoping he would become the next great god-king. Naturally, this would have to happen after her husband, Osiris, had impregnated her with the seed that would become Horus,[40] but this kind of forward-thinking was child's play for the goddess. She watched Ra grow old and decrepit, and she hatched a plan to ensure the most powerful part of him would remain on earth and be passed down to her son.

Ra was ageing terribly. He spent most of his day babbling and drooling, but he still wanted to take the same, daily walk to see the kingdom he created. He was also adamant that he continue to rule over it. Isis watched the old god walk, and she learned the route he labored over each day. Being as patient as she was cunning, Isis waited, and she soon saw her opportunity to reach out and snatch a falling drop of saliva from Ra's lagging mouth. She took the divine spittle and mixed it with some dirt until she could roll it out in the form of a deadly snake, which immediately sprang to life in her hands.

While the old king was sleeping, Isis walked out to the crossroad that was at the nexus of the beginning and end of Ra's journey, and she buried the snake there. The next day, Ra waddled toward the crossroad, and with his greying eyes, he failed to see the snake emerging from the dirt. It sunk its fangs into his ankle and the pain erupted like a volcano throughout his aged body. So fierce was the burning wound, it was said that all the pine trees nearby erupted in flames.[41]

In agony and weakening by the hour, Ra called on all the deities to help him, including Isis, the great healer. He begged for her help, and she looked at the wound with false fear in her eyes. She shook her head and told the god it was a wound inflicted by a beast not of his own making, but one that contained his essence, and she was incapable of treating the wound without one essential ingredient: his true name.

Ra writhed in pain, spitting out his names. He said Khepri, Atum, and a thousand-thousand other names he had won while bringing creatures, rock forms, and the unseen winds to existence, but Isis knew these were not his

true name. Ra finally gave in, and he told Isis to draw closer so he could summon his true name from the depths of his tortured body and whisper it into her ear. He did so, and the name fell like weighted lead to the base of Isis's belly, where it would pass on to her son when he was born. Isis smiled and drew up a spell to cure the wound she'd caused, unbeknownst to any of the other gods, and she breathed it silently:

> "Break out, scorpions! Leave Ra! Eye of Horus, leave the god!
>
> Flame of the mouth—I am the one who made you, I am the one who sent you —come to the earth, powerful poison!
>
> See, the great god has given his name away. Ra shall live, once the poison has died."[42]

The Eye of Ra

The "Eye of Ra" is one of the better-known symbols from ancient Egyptian religion, second perhaps only to the famous Eye of Horus that continues to appear on souvenirs and tattoos, but its role in the mythology is more fascinating than its fame would suggest. The Eye of Ra is the god's eye and a separate entity in her own right. She is the symbol of his power, and as such, she is a being of pure, unadulterated power feared by all of the gods. This is a common theme running through all stories of the Eye of Ra and is the basis of the myth of the "Distant Goddess".

The Distant Goddess refers to Ra's eye in her disembodied form. She is referred to as distant because she left him in a rage one day and refused to be anywhere near him. It's unclear exactly why she grew so irate with Ra, but according to some sources, she became furious with him when he replaced her with another eye. Other sources state it is because he betrayed her after she punished humanity for him. Nevertheless, it is agreed that she fled to the distant depths of the Nubian Desert where she could unleash her fury, uninterrupted in the wilderness. None of the deities, not even the all-powerful Ra, were prepared to take on the unbridled fury of the Distant Goddess in her current state. The reason for this was that Ra was only "all-powerful" because he possessed the one weapon able to defeat any enemy that might challenge him. Without the Eye of Ra, he was vulnerable, but more importantly, without her master to direct and guide her, the universe was vulnerable to the

Eye's wrath, which put the very existence of the cosmos in jeopardy. This is why none of the deities wished to search for the Distant Goddess and risk incurring her wrath in the process.

Eventually, Ra turned to one of his most trusted confidants, Thoth, who sought out the Distant Goddess armed with only his mind and magic. Thoth took the form of the baboon and scoured the desert looking for the formidable Goddess. When he found her in the Nubian Desert, he initially tried to convince her to return by ensuring her that she was not only respected among the other gods but that her role as the Eye of Re was integral to the natural order of things. It is said that Thoth asked the Goddess no fewer than 1,077 times to come home, demonstrating his talent for persistence and unwillingness to give up.[43] Nevertheless, this line of reasoning did not persuade the Distant Goddess, and she reacted by showing Thoth one of her most terrifying aspects: a fire-breathing lioness. This scared Thoth, who was fearful yet respectful of the goddess.

With that, Thoth decided to change his tack and persuade her another way. What followed was a series of fables implying that her destructive anger balanced the justice of *maat*, and that without it, the universe would fall into chaos.[44] One of his fables went on to influence that great inventor of fables, Aesop. According to Aesop's fable, there was once a lion that was so ferocious and terrifying that all of the creatures around him feared and respected him. He used to roam the wilderness looking for prey, but one day he came across a bedraggled panther limping along his path. The panther's skin was torn and his fur was left in tatters, so the lion asked the poor creature who had done this to him. The panther replied that man had done it, and continued on its way.

The lion continued walking, and as he did he came across cows, oxen, donkeys, and horses all chained up and mistreated like the panther had been. The lion surveyed the pitiful creatures in shock, but when he came across a mighty bear and a lion in the same condition, he vowed to make man suffer for what he had done to his brethren. It was during this declaration of vengeance that a small mouse ran under the lion's foot. The mouse begged the lion to spare its life, so that it may one day repay the lion with some service he could offer. The lion, seeing that the mouse would hardly satisfy

his appetite, laughed at the mouse's presumption and let it go.

The lion left the poor creatures and went in search of the culprit. He had planned on unleashing the fullness of his strength and ferocity on "man," but he underestimated man's cunning and soon found himself falling into a trap with a binding net of crossed leather falling on top of him. The lion roared and fought with the net, but it was the mouse who came to his aid and was able to gnaw through the leather straps and set him free. When the lion asked why the mouse helped him, the mouse said, "It is beautiful to do good."[45]

The story in its own right has enough aesthetic quality to ensure its survival through the centuries, later to be written down and amended slightly by Aesop, but the Egyptian version has some notable religious aspects worthy of mentioning. First, Thoth's persistence is paramount to the religious tale of him and the Distant Goddess. Showing that he asked the ferocious goddess 1,077 times makes Thoth a hero in a very mythological way. It was a common theme for goddesses in later myths (such as the Greek and Roman variants), but in Egyptian mythology, persistence and resilience were common heroic attributes. This is even more important since, in Egyptian mythology, the hero was often a magician. It is possible that this narrative trait was established by the story of Thoth's adventure with the Distant Goddess, but even if it wasn't, the story certainly gives those attributes a powerful pedigree.

Another aspect worthy of mention is Thoth's taking the form of a baboon in order to search for the Distant Goddess. There is an association between Thoth, the fire-breathing goddess, and the underworld since there was said to be four baboons "with scorching breath" that guarded the Lake of Fire in the underworld.[46] These baboons were also judges of the dead, so what can be seen in this tale is Thoth traversing an unwelcoming desert in order to face a supernatural power that may spell his destruction if he is not wise. In this way, the story of the Distant Goddess sets a precedent for Thoth's role in the preparation of the dead for their perilous journey through the Duat.

In the end, Thoth does manage to convince the Distant Goddess to return "home," and, in doing so, he restores the second powerful eye in his "career." Thoth's ability to restore the Eye of Ra and the Eye of Horus prove to be pivotal episodes in Egyptian mythology.

Ra’s Final Punishment of Humankind

Returned to health, Ra was no longer as decrepit as he had been when Isis tricked him, but he found that his bones had turned to silver and his skin had turned to gold. He knew that his time on earth was coming to an end, yet he was still jealous of his throne. He saw conspirators all around him, nowhere more so than among the humans.

Distrusting the humans, he called on the deities he trusted most: those who were born, like him, in the waters of Nun. They came upon his summoning, but they did so in secret so as not to raise the wily humans' suspicions. He told the gods he didn’t trust the humans, and that he felt there were contingents among them that were plotting against him, seeking to dethrone him, and hoping to rule the world for themselves.

Ra praised these deities for their loyalty and asked for their advice. They announced their undying loyalty to the creator god and told him he should waste no time in punishing the guilty ones among the humans. Instead, they suggested he should send his Eye down to do it, which he did. He told his Eye to take the form of Hathor and lay waste to those who plotted against him.

As if the humans felt the wrath of Ra honing in on them, the guilty fled into the depths of the desert in the hope of averting his judgment. The Eye of Ra saw everything, and she made the sands wet with the blood of the guilty, wading in it when she returned at nightfall.

The Eye of Ra, still in her manifestation as the goddess Hathor, planned to rest that night and return the next day to slay the remaining humans who had hidden in their homes by the fertile fields near the Nile. While the Eye rested, Ra called upon his priest, “the Side-Lock Wearer in Heliopolis”,[47] and told him to gather up a mysterious red mineral and mix it with 7,000 jars of beer so it would look like blood. Ra flooded the Nile plains with it, leaving the scene looking like a massacre. When his Eye traveled to the fields the next day, she was surprised to see her work had already been done. She had wanted to wade through the blood of humans, so she knelt down and sated her thirst with it. Little by little she grew drunk and calm, and she returned to Ra as happy as if she had destroyed the humans herself.

With his Eye appeased and the guilty humans punished, Ra decided that he no longer wanted to reside on earth where his body was vulnerable to age, so he left the gods and the humans. Riding on the back of the Heavenly Cow, he left his throne to his son Osiris and set about making the heavenly bodies his priests would watch and measure for centuries to come.[48]

This is an excellent myth for showing the polemical mindset of the ancient Egyptians. The dessert, as in the case of the myth of the Distant Goddess, is a land of chaos and death, and this is where the guilty humans fled and met their violent end. On the other hand, the fertile land on either side of the Nile - the "Black Land" of order and fertility - was where the humans found their salvation, just as they had every year during the harvest. The flooding of the fields, even with a liquid with such macabre resemblance, would have resonated with ancient listeners since the flooding of the Nile was the source of their irrigation and ultimately the source of their wealth as an agricultural kingdom. It is left unsaid as to why Ra chose to save the innocent humans and why he tricked his Eye, rather than commanding her to return to him. Given her power and ferocity, perhaps he thought it better to sate her bloodlust and sedate her with beer than incur her wrath and risk another episode like that of the Distant Goddess.

Ra’s Dysfunctional Family

When Ra ascended into the heavens, he left the throne to his son, Osiris, but in an act of carelessness to the point of recklessness, he did not dictate who would inherit the throne after Osiris. After Horus had survived the difficulties of his childhood, hiding from his uncle Seth, he came into manhood and demanded the throne that had been his father’s. Accounts vary as to the exact length of Seth’s reign before this moment, but it is generally understood that when Osiris died and Isis took Horus into hiding, Seth ascended the throne of Egypt and "brought wickedness to the land."[49]

This is, of course, an etiological myth, which may be the reason for Seth being presented as more wicked than he is during accounts of his protecting Ra in his barque. If the creators of the myth had wished to laud the line of Horus, they would need a suitably rotten adversary for him to defeat, and in this story, they succeed in making Seth out to be that adversary. In the myth, Ra is not easily persuaded by Horus's or Isis's arguments, which may suggest

a kinship between the father and the son who protected him.

By far, the fullest and most interesting source for the resolution of the contest for the throne comes from a New Kingdom papyrus called the *Beatty Papyrus I*, which contains the story called the *Contendings of Horus and Seth.*[50] The text describes a tribunal of the Ennead with Ra as its head and some other gods in which they debate who should ascend to the throne: the inexperienced youth or the uncle. Both pretenders had their supporters, and Seth even has the "all powerful Ra" on his side.

By far, the fullest and most interesting source for the resolution of the contest for the throne comes from a New Kingdom papyrus called the Beatty Papyrus I, which provides the story called the Contendings of Horus and Seth.[51] The text describes a tribunal of the Ennead and some other gods in which they debate who should ascend the throne, the inexperienced youth or the uncle. Both pretenders had their supporters and Seth even has the “all powerful Re” on his side. Shu declares that it is “just” that the son ascend the throne, and both Thoth and Isis declare themselves triumphant, provoking the anger of Re since they did not wait for his agreement.

Agreeing with Re, Seth offers to settle matters with a fist fight against the young upstart and the gods bicker and fail to come to a decision. Re first asks the Ennead to send a letter to Banebdjedet, the ram-headed god and “Lord of Carnal Pleasure,”[52] for help, but he only succeeds in telling them to send another letter to Neith, the “Great Goddess’ of hunting and war. Neith replies bluntly: “Award the office of Osiris to his son Horus. Don’t commit such blatant acts of inequity which are illegal, or I shall become so furious that the sky will touch the ground. The Universal Lord, the Bull who resides in Heliopolis, ought to be told: Enrich Seth in his possessions. Give him Anath and Astarte, your two daughters, and install Horus in the position of his father Osiris.”

Thoth receives the letter and reads it out to the Ennead who all agree that Neith is right, but Re refuses to acquiesce to her judgment since it is not in line with his own wishes. Livid, he accuses Horus of being too young and unprepared for the office as well as having bad breath to boot. The gods continue to fail at convincing Re of Horus’ right and soon enough they all leave the hall furiously, decrying Re’s injustice. “After a considerable while

Hathor, Lady of the Southern Sycamore, came and stood before her father, the Universal Lord, and she exposed her vagina before his very eyes. Thereupon the great god laughed at her. Then he got right up and sat down with the Great Ennead. He said to Horus and Seth: “speak concerning yourselves."

The episode may appear unseemly to the modern reader of this presumably religious text, but it is actually quite similar to the Greek episode in which the goddess Baubo reveals her vagina to make Demeter laugh and put an end to the destruction she wrought after losing Persephone. Laughter, according to Lewis Hyde, is used in this case as a form of breaking the spell on an exceedingly bad mood.[53] With Re being more amenable, the gods return to the hall and Seth states his position first. "As for me, I am Seth, greatest in virility among (the) Ennead, for I slay the opponent of Re daily while I am at the prow of the Bark of the Millions, whereas not any (other) god is able to do it. I should receive the office of Osiris."

At this, the gods Onuris and Thoth begin to argue that the living son should gain the throne of his father. In response, Banebdjedet asks them if a mature and able uncle should be passed over to crown an inexperienced “lad.” Isis, furious, says that she wants to bring the tribunal to Atum himself. At this the rest of the Ennead tell her such measures need not be resorted to. Seth interjects, saying he won’t recognise any tribunal that Isis is a part of and, at this, Re orders the tribunal to move “across the river” to the neutral “Island in the Middle,” and decrees that the divine ferryman Nemty not allow Isis – or any who look like her – to cross so that the rest of the gods can debate the issue soberly.

> “Then Isis came and approached Nemty, the ferryman, as he was sitting near his boat, after she had transformed herself into an old woman who walked with a hobble and (wore) a small golden signet-ring on her hand. She said to him, "It is in order that you might ferry (me) across to the Island in the Middle that I come to you, because it is for the young lad that I have come carrying this bowlful of porridge, since he has been tending some cattle on the Island in the Middle for five days now and is hungry."
>
> He said to her, "I have been told not to ferry any woman across."

But she said to him, "It is with reference to Isis that you have been told this which you have (just) mentioned."

He said to her, "What will you give me in order that you may be ferried across to the Island in the Middle?"

Said Isis to him, "I will give you this cake."

He said to her, "What good is it to me, your cake? Is it in exchange for your cake that I should ferry you across to the Island in the Middle when I have been told not to ferry any woman across?"

Then she said to him, "I will give you the golden signet-ring which is on (my) hand."

And he said to her, "Hand over the golden signet-ring."

And she gave it to him. Then he ferried her across to the Island in the Middle."

On the island, Isis found the Ennead sitting and eating bread together but before she could be detected she transformed herself into a beautiful maiden, knowing that the insatiable Seth wouldn't be able to resist trying to woo her once he caught sight of her. She was right, and Seth darted out from the divine company, overtook the disguised Isis and called to her from behind a tree.

He said to her, "I am here with you, beautiful maiden."

And she said to him, "Respect, my great lord. As for me, I was a wife (living) with a cattleman to whom I bore a son. My husband died, and the lad started tending his father's cattle. But then a stranger came and settled in my stable. He said thus in speaking to my son, "I shall beat you and confiscate your father's cattle and evict you," said he in speaking to him. Now it is my desire to have you afford him protection."

Thereupon Seth said to her, "Is it while the son of the male is still living that the cattle are to be given to the stranger?"

And so Isis transformed herself into a kite and flew up and perched on top of an acacia tree. She called to Seth and said to him, "Be ashamed of yourself. It is your own mouth that has said it. It is your own cleverness that has judged you. What comeback do you have now?"

Having been tricked, Seth returns to the rest of the Ennead and, although he’s ashamed, he turns the blame on the “tricky woman” Isis, instead of acknowledging her logic. Pre-Harakhti asks him what made him seem so dejected and he told her what Isis’ question had been.

Thereupon Pre-Harakhti said to him, "Now look here, it is you yourself that has judged your own self. What comeback do you have now?"

So Seth said to him, "Have Nemty, the ferryman, brought and severe punishment inflicted upon him, saying, “Why did you let her be ferried across?” So it shall be said to him."

Then Nemty, the ferryman, was brought before the Ennead, and the forepart of his feet removed. So Nemty abjured gold even to this day in the presence of the Great Ennead, saying, "Gold shall be because of me an abomination unto my city."

Then the Ennead ferried across to the western tract and sat down on the mountain.

The great Atum then sends a letter to the Ennead on the island, declaring that the white crown of Egypt should be put on Horus’ head and still the decision is not agreed upon. Seth is livid and challenges Horus to submerge himself in water in the form of a hippopotamus, so that they can fight as the ferocious beasts, at which point Isis fears for her son’s life again and decides to take matters into her own hands.

Then [Isis] fetched a skein of yarn. She fashioned a line, fetched a deben-weight’s (worth) of copper, cast it in (the form of) a harpoon, tied the line to it, and hurled it into the water at the spot where Horus and Seth had submerged. But then the copper (barb) bit into the person of her son Horus. So Horus let out a loud shriek, saying, "Help me, mother Isis, my mother. Appeal to your copper (barb) to let go of me. I am Horus, son of Isis."

Thereupon Isis let out a loud shriek and told (her) copper (barb), "Let go of him. See, it is my son Horus. He is my child."

So her copper (barb) let go of him.

Then she again hurled it back into the water, and it bit into the person of Seth. So Seth let out a loud shriek, saying, "What have I done against you, my sister Isis? Appeal to your copper (barb) to let go of me. I am your maternal brother, Isis."

Then she felt exceedingly compassionate toward him. Thereupon Seth called to her, saying, "Do you prefer the stranger to (your) maternal brother Seth?"

So Isis appealed to her copper (barb), saying, "Let go of him. See, it is Isis's maternal brother whom you have bitten into."

Then the copper (barb) let go of him.

Horus, son of Isis, became furious at his mother Isis and went out with his face as fierce as an Upper Egyptian panther's, having his cleaver of 16 deben-weight in his hand. He removed the head of his mother Isis, put it in his arms, and ascended the mountain. Then Isis transformed herself into a statue of flint, which had no head.

Said Pre-Harakhti to Thoth, "What is that which has arrived having no head?"

So Thoth told Pre-Harakhti, "My good lord, that is Isis the Great, the God's Mother, after Horus, her son, removed her head."

Thereupon Pre-Harakhti let out a loud cry and said to the Ennead, "Let us go and inflict severe punishment upon him."

Then the Ennead ascended those mountains in order to search for Horus, son of Isis.

Still smarting from the injustice doled out to him by the Ennead and even his own mother, the young Horus takes himself off to relax under a shenusha tree in the western Red Lands of the desert. The Ennead search the length and breadth of Egypt for the young pretender but it is Seth who spots Horus first. Approaching him stealthily, the older god pounces on his nephew and, in an instant, gouges out his eyes and places them on a mountain to "illuminate the earth." When the Ennead exhaust the land in their search they reunite, and ask Set if he had any luck finding Horus, to which the wily god replies that he has not.

A depiction of Horus as a falcon holding Shen rings in his talons

Not wanting to abandon the search for her foster son, Hathor continues to leave no stone or grain of sand unturned and eventually finds Horus weeping in the shade of the shenusha tree. Horrified at the sight, the divine wet nurse finds and milks a gazelle and pours the milk in each of Horus' eye sockets, healing him, before returning to the Ennead to tell them of Seth's treachery. When they learn of this, they decide Seth needs to be punished so they call both pretenders to the throne to yet another tribunal.

> Then they were brought before the Ennead. Said the Universal Lord before the Great Ennead to Horus and Seth, "Go and obey what I tell you. You should eat and drink so that we may have (some) peace. Stop quarreling so every day on end."
>
> Then Seth told Horus, "Come, let's make holiday in my house."
>
> Horus told him, "I"ll do so, surely, I"ll do so, I"ll do so."
>
> Now afterward, (at) evening time, bed was prepared for them, and they both lay down. But during the night, Seth caused his phallus to become stiff and inserted it between Horus's thighs. Then Horus placed his hands between his thighs and received Seth's semen. Horus went to tell his mother Isis, "Help me, Isis, my mother, come and see what Seth has done to me."

And he opened his hand(s) and let her see Seth’s semen. She let out a loud shriek, seized the copper (knife), cut off his hand(s) that were [impure]. Then she fetched some fragrant ointment and applied it to Horus’s phallus. She caused it to become stiff and inserted it into a pot, and caused his semen to flow down into it.

Holding her son’s seed in her closed hand, Isis travels to the gardener that tended Seth’s lush crops and she asks him which vegetables the god ate. The gardener replies that his lascivious master touched none of the vegetables except the lettuces. When she hears this, Isis reaches down and pours the semen onto a lettuce and travels back to the tribunal of the Ennead.

[Seth and Horus] both went to the tribunal and stood in the presence of the Great Ennead. They were told, ‘speak concerning yourselves."

Said Seth, "Let me be awarded the office of Ruler, l.p.h., for as to Horus, the one who is standing (trial), I have performed the labor of a male against him."

The Ennead let out a load cry. They spewed and spat at Horus’s face. Horus laughed at them. Horus then took an oath by god as follows, "All that Seth has said is false. Let Seth’s semen be summoned that we may see from where it answers, and my own be summoned that we may see from where it answers."

Then Thoth, lord of script and scribe of truth for the Ennead, put his hand on Horus’s shoulder and said, "Come out, you semen of Seth."

And it answered him from the water in the interior of the marsh. Thoth put his hand on Seth’s shoulder and said, "Come out, you semen of Horus."

Then it said to him, "Where shall I come from?"

Thoth said to it, "Come out from his ear."

Thereupon it said to him, "Is it from his ear that I should issue forth, seeing that I am divine seed?"

Then Thoth said to it, "Come out from the top of his head."

And it emerged as a golden solar disk upon Seth’s head. Seth became exceeding furious and extended his hand(s) to seize the

> golden solar disk. Thoth took it away from him and placed it as a crown upon his (own) head. Then the Ennead said, "Horus is right, and Seth is wrong."

And yet, Seth is still incapable of accepting the findings of the tribunal. With Re on his side he once again challenges Horus to a competition to decide the fate of the royal line. He challenges Horus to make a boat and race it along the Nile.

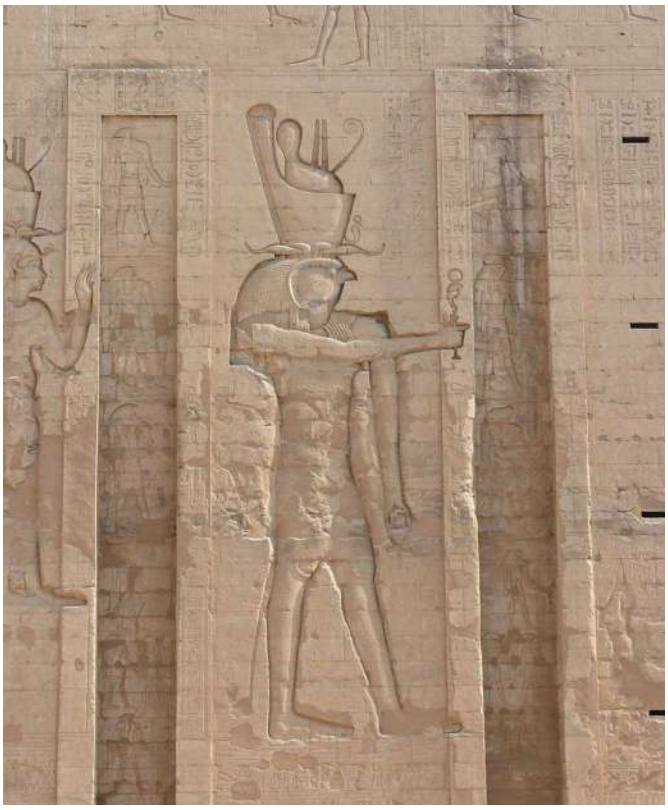
A relief depicting Horus with the crowns

Then Horus built for himself a boat of pine, plastered it over with gypsum, and launched it into the water at evening time without anybody who was in the entire land having observed it. Seth saw Horus’s boat and thought it was of stone. And he went to the mountain, cut off a mountaintop, and built for himself a boat of stone of 138 cubits. They embarked upon their ships in the presence of the Ennead. Then Seth’s boat sank in the water. So Seth transformed himself into a hippopotamus and scuttled Horus’s boat. Horus took his copper (harpoon) and hurled it at the person of Seth. Then the Ennead told him: "Don’t hurl it at him."

Horus obeys the decree of the Ennead and leaves his uncle to nurse his hurt pride. Horus sails down the river to Sais to speak with Neith and remind her that he had bested his uncle again and again and surely now deserves the divine crown of Egypt. Neith was always on Seth's side in the contention between him and his uncle and it dawns on her that there is still one deity that they have not called upon for judgment. Nieth calls on Thoth and has him write to Osiris, son of Re, and have him offer a final judgement. When Osiris reads the letter in the Duat, the Land of the Dead, he replies immediately: "Why should my son Horus be cheated when it was I that made you mighty and it was I (alone) who could create barley and emmer in order to sustain the gods as well as the cattle following the gods, whereas not any god or any goddess found himself (competent enough) to do it?"

When he reads this, Pre-Harakhti replies scornfully saying that barley and emmer would have existed without Osiris' presence and that his judgement is no more forceful or definitive than that of the rest of the Ennead. Osiris replies, "It is exceedingly good, all that which you have done, O you who invented the Ennead as an accomplishment, although justice was allowed to sink down within the netherworld. Please look at the situation also on your part. As for the land in which I am, it is filled with savage-faced messengers who do not fear any god or (any) goddess. I have but to let them go forth, and they will fetch the heart of whoever commits misdeeds and they will be here with me. Indeed, what is the meaning of my happening to be here resting in the west while you are all outside? Who among you is there that is mightier than I? But see, you have invented injustice as an accomplishment. When Ptah the Great, South of his Wall, Lord of Ankh-tawi, created the sky, isn't it so that he told the stars that are in it, "It is in the west where King Osiris is that you shall set every night?" (And he told me), "Now after (the manner of) gods, so patricians and commoners also shall go to rest in the place where you are." So he said to me."[54]

It seems that the threat was the final tiebreaker for the Ennead and although Seth tries to fight Horus again he loses and finally rescinds his claim to the throne, declaring his loyalty to the "rightful heir." The Ennead crown Horus and Isis gives a "loud shriek" of delight at finally having been vindicated.



A relief depicting Horus in the Temple of Edfu

There are various theories of how this important myth came to be. One theory was that it is a memory of a civil war. This kind of interpretation is known as euhemerism and it entails taking the aspects of a myth and extrapolating real-world events from them, such as the two gods Horus and Seth – each representing a real-world pretender and his followers – battling to take on the throne and establish the patrilineal inheritence used henceforth.

As the story goes, after he defeated his uncle, Horus ruled the two kingdoms of Egypt for 300 years. During that time, he took vicious revenge on all of the followers of Seth, including those who supported him on the terrestrial level by burning down his temples and the towns that housed them. This part of the myth would coincide with the theory that the story represents a civil war, since after the ascension to the throne whoever won the contest would no doubt have tried to consolidate his power and eradicating the troublesome followers of his adversary would have been an effective, if bloody, way of doing so. After Seth, Thoth ruled the land of Egypt for 7,726 years according to the dynastic reckoning and after him Maat ascended to the

throne. 11 vaguely named demi-gods then ruled for 7,714 years until the first human pharaohs ascended the thrones as ‘sitting Horuses’, or “followers of Horus,”[55] awaiting the day of their coronation to receive the royal spirit – or ka – and the day of their death to join the rest of the gods in their celestial existence.[56]

Joyce Tyldesley suggests that the rather laborious format of the myth would not have been so for the ancient Egyptians, who were used to the long drawn-out legal battles that often resulted in the same arguments being presented again and again without a guarantee of a resolution for either side. However, on a spiritual and sociological level it was vital that Horus and Seth eventually arrive at a resolution after their battle. Royal art glorified “Horus the Uniter” and even depicted Seth as “tying together the heraldic plants’ of Upper and Lower Egypt.[57] Depending on the artist and the area of Egypt where the narrative was displayed, the reconciliation of Horus and Seth was considered impossible and, instead of having such a powerful adversary, the wise god Thoth was put in Seth’s place as the “binder” of the two kingdoms.[58]

From a less euhemeristic and more mythological point of view, the story represents the divine Horus overcoming the dangerous and unbridled virulence of Seth.[59] Some older versions of the myth have Horus the Elder as its protagonist, fighting his brother Seth for the throne, and in these versions the story takes on the theme of a primeval and elemental myth, showing the “celestial falcon” battling the “god of storms’ for supremacy in the world of mortals.[60]

In the Contendings version, each god is represented as having played their divine role as well as of having taken sides. In it, Thoth inscribes the formal letters to each of the gods, the others “replying immediately” suggests that although the gods were capable of writing (itself considered a magical act), only Thoth is capable of creating the formal, sacred, non-inflammatory or emotional missives from the councils. Isis protects her son and her brother when she is appealed to and Osiris reminds the living gods of his role in fertility and of his power to destroy them with the horrors of the Duat. Hathor, the wet-nurse, gives “life” by restoring the powerful with the milk she gains from a gazelle. In later myths Nephthys became Horus’ wet nurse

in the form of the “divine cow,” which probably has some connection with the story that Plutarch relates about Isis’ role in the dispute between her son and brother:[61] “Isis, however, to whom [Seth] was delivered in chains, did not cause him to be put to death, but released him and let him go. Horus could not endure this with equanimity, he laid hands upon his mother and wrested the royal diadem from her head; but [Thoth] put upon her a helmet like unto the head of a cow.”[62]

Plutarch wrote that he heard the ending of the Contendings and that he found it “blasphemous,” since Plutarch, who was writing principally in order to make the point that all gods and myths are the same across the world, believed such an act committed by the divine was nothing more than the sacrilegious “whimsy” of poets. However, just as he recorded Horus placing a helmet in the shape of a cow’s head, in the Contendings Isis did not die either, and the rest of the gods replaced her severed head with that of a cow, explaining away this common iconography of Isis.

If Plutarch did in fact read the Contendings, then the episode in which the goddess Baubo reveals her vagina to Re most probably scandalized him even further. From a mythological point of view, however, the solemnity of a moment such as that of Re contemplating his own displeasure with the other gods was not only not immune to the presence of the humorous, it actually needed it. According to the acclaimed mythologist Joseph Campbell, “humour is the touchstone of the truly mythological as distinct from the more literal-minded and sentimental theological mood …their entertaining myths transport the mind and spirit, not up to, but past [the gods], into the yonder void; from which perspective the more heavily freighted theological dogmas then appear to have been only pedagogical lures: their function, to cart the unadroit intellect away from its concrete clutter of facts and events to a comparatively rarefied zone, where, as a final boon, all existence … may at least be seen transmuted into the semblance of a lightly passing recurrent mere childhood dream of bliss and fright.”[63] This is precisely what happens in the Contendings. The laughter breaks the “childhood dream of bliss and fright” and transforms “Re the stubborn and contentious’ into “Re the open-minded judge” who will debate the issue soberly.

For Isis, choosing not to kill her brother is a clear sign that her power is not

one of passion, like the wrath of Sekhmet, for instance. Instead, hers is the power of the protector.[64] Tyldesley points out that this side of Isis as a wrathful enemy of Seth – she was capable of killing him and burning his companions to death – was the result of later non-Egyptian influences on the Isis/Horus/Seth myth and not true to the earlier versions of her character that influenced the writing of the Contendings.

In the Contendings, Seth is an unusual trickster in that through his ambitious scheming, he causes others to become "culture heroes' by creating cultural mainstays such as Isis' papyrus boat, which the ancient Egyptians believed was immune to being attacked by crocodiles, and Horus' boat made of pine and gypsum. These boats were always vulnerable to being scuttled by the ferocious hippopotamuses represented by Seth too. In the case of the lettuce, to ancient readers this would have also been a clear mythological trope of Seth since lettuce was believed to be an aphrodisiac in ancient Egypt. It was even depicted as such on tomb walls. That Seth only ate lettuces – and that he was so easily tricked by Isis in her maiden form – is indicative of his role as a sex-crazed fiend in the story of the Contendings of Horus and Seth.

An interesting cross-cultural similarity the Contendings reveals is that of the difficult relationship between an uncle and nephew in a matrilineal society. Although ancient Egypt was not, at that historical period, a matrilineal society, the importance of agriculture (more highly emphasized even than that of its neighbors in Greece and Rome) and the great antiquity of its civilization appears to be a remnant of the agrarian peoples of the 9th and 8th millennia BCE. Furthermore, although the dynastic lines were patrilineal, women continued to hold a prominent part in the royal structure, with female heirs apparent being more common than in many other cultures in the vicinity.

In the early agrarian communities, the goddess took primacy over the male deities since she was the symbol of fertility and the regenerative powers of the earth. In many modern western myths familial contention is often found between either the father or son – as is the case in Sigmund Freud's theory of the "Oedipus Complex" – or between brothers. However, in matrilineal societies, such as the Trobriand culture studied by Bronislaw Malinowski, the most contentious relationship is that between a boy and his maternal uncle. In

those societies the maternal uncle is expected to defer to his nephew but many of the myths present them as enemies whose ostensible relationship betrays the deeply harbored animosity they feel for each other. In the Trobriand society, “magic” is supposed to be passed between maternal uncle and nephew but he often does so unwillingly.[65] In the case of the Contendings, the question of royal inheritance is ironed out through a series of “power plays’ Seth inflicts on his nephew, which are constantly refuted and repelled by either the mother or Horus himself. In one of the early versions of the myth, Isis warns Horus not to let Seth penetrate him but instead to simulate the penetration, as he does, and trick his uncle into releasing his “magic” in a “non-dominating” manner. The essence of Horus’ own magic – at least in iconographical terms – is the eye(s) that his uncle gouges out and is then restored with even more magical potency, thanks to the nourishing milk provided by Horus’ wet nurse. Although these cultures are disparate in nature, the structural similarities in their myths are revelatory in the case of Horus and Seth.

Despite the fact it seems as if Osiris is the ultimate authority in this myth, it is unlikely this was believed throughout all the land. It is true Osiris was an extremely powerful god, and certainly the favored one in many parts of Egypt (such as at Abydos in the eighth nome, his cult center), but the majority of the kings added "Ra" to their names. Ra was the beginning and the end in the Egyptian religious mindset in many cases. In fact, one of Ra's manifestation was Atum, which means "the finisher," lord of totality, a god that simultaneously “represented evolution and the completion of evolution."[66] He was the sun as it approached the horizon, ready to endure his ordeals and return to the earth more powerful than before.

This concept of cyclical time is integral to understanding Egyptian religious thought, but more importantly, it is integral to understanding Ra's worship. As the highly acclaimed Egyptologist Geraldine Pinch put it, “The great events of Egyptian myth could be treated either as things that happened once in the remote past or as things that needed to happen over and over again.”[67] The night was a time of fear, as was the last month of the year, when it was believed the king’s enemies were stronger and more likely to rebel against him. Whereas the dawn was a time of renewed hope, Khepri brought with him the light and the apex of the sun god’s powers, imitated in the

inauguration of the king taking place at New Year.[68]

Nowhere was this notion of cycles more prominent than in the myth cycles of Ra. Three of his names - Khepri, Ra, and Atum - signified the lifecycles of the sun, governing all aspects of life on earth. Ra was undoubtedly the symbol of time. The ancient Egyptians saw repetition in all things, and Ra's changing lifecycle was at the center of it all. This is most likely why he was seen as the creator god and the god of beginnings and endings, and it certainly attests to just how far back he went in Egyptian religious thought. As Pinch noted, "in early times, this cycle could be described in more brutal terms. In the evening, the sun god died by being eaten by his mother, the sky goddess, and was replaced by a multitude of stars. In the morning, the reborn sun god ate all the star gods, staining the sky with their blood (the redness of dawn) and absorbing their power. The one god became many and the many gods became one, so life came out of death."[69]

This notion of many gods appearing from a single deity is a common aspect of Egyptian mythology and religion, and it was replicated in other religions. The Greeks used epithets to define their gods, and the Judeo-Christian traditions mimicked a general cultural move toward monotheism happening across the Mediterranean. Gods became spirits, daemons, archangels, angels, and demons. All were aspects of a singular deity, and this was the same kind of religious belief the Egyptians had developed thousands of years before.

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